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Media Notes

From Below The Beltway, A Few Words On Words

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Bill Kovach, the former New York Times Washington bureau chief who went south in December to become editor of the Atlanta Journal and Constitution, makes no bones about his relief at finding work outside the Beltway.

In a recent interview with the Atlanta newspapers' in-house newsletter, Kovach muses that "D.C. is a big power center. It's a city that knows exactly where it is and what it is and why it is. You get a bit jaded and introverted living in Washington . . ."

Kovach, who left The Times after the executive editor's job—after which he had been a contender—went to Max Frankel, also said: "Washington produces very little except words. Congress produces words, the administration produces words, the journalists produce words . . . An idea may get trapped among all those words every now and then. But generally, it's just a lot of words. I welcomed the opportunity to get out of there."

Hired to restore the reputation the Constitution and Journal enjoyed in the 1960s, Kovach also made it clear that his candor was no fluke.

Reporters under his new Atlanta regime need to work harder "and prepare themselves for their interviews—not go in cold and expect the person they're interviewing to have all the answers."

Editors can't "abuse the reader by throwing information on the page . . . that's lazy, follow-the-path-of-least-resistance journalism," he says.

And in one comment that could have caused a revolution at The Times as well as most major dailies, Kovach says he wants to "break down notions of turf. Stories don't belong to any reporter, any editor. They belong to the reader."

Clearly, the hottest contest between a politician and the media is in the sun-baked state of Arizona.

The challenger is the unpredictable new Republican Gov. Evan Mecham (pronounced "Meek-am"), whose outbursts against the press have generated much criticism by the news media but have also brought admissions from Arizona editors that stories and columns had been intentionally withheld. A story in The Arizona Republic about the governor's antipress campaign included the admission that The Republic had refused to print two columns and a number of stories about Mecham "because of a concern that they weren't fair . . ."

Mecham's latest target, however, has so far kept his job and his column. He is John Kolbe, longtime political writer for The Phoenix Gazette and the brother of Rep. Jim Kolbe (R-Ariz.).

John Kolbe became the governor's primary target after he wrote a column saying Mecham exhibited "breath-taking naivete" during a visit to Washington for the National Governors' Association conference.

After that, Mecham declared Kolbe a "nonperson." He banned him from press conferences until legal experts said he couldn't bar one journalist from public encounters.

The battle has quickly escalated. Pat Murphy, publisher of The Gazette and The Arizona Republic, told the Arizona Chamber of Commerce that Mecham was conducting "a vicious and mindless campaign of orchestrated vengeance against the media." He added that those who "carry around the silly notion that newspapers plot and plan to 'get' them are in need of counseling."

The governor canceled a press conference after Kolbe asked the first question, which dealt with the timing of an announcement of funds for state education. Mecham ignored the question, and then two other reporters, who insist they had not planned in advance, followed up by repeating Kolbe's question, leading the governor to declare the press conference adjourned.

A few days later, state Republican chairman Burt Kruglick suggested that Kolbe temper his columns on the statehouse or be reassigned, a suggestion Kolbe labeled "outrageous." Kolbe's paper returned the volley, calling for the Republicans to reassign Kruglick.

Kolbe is not known in Arizona as a screaming left-winger. On the contrary, he is described in a local alternative newspaper by former Republic col-

umnist Tom Fitzpatrick as providing "must reading for the respectable right wing. They can always be assured of receiving warm, effusive and wordy treatment at Kolbe's hands."

Although Kolbe says there is no compromise in the works, the governor told a television interviewer he thinks he has come up with a solution for his press conferences.

"The next time, instead of letting two or three reporters play games . . . it's simple. They'll have to hold up their hand, and I'll recognize who I want," he said.

Said Kolbe: "I don't know why he didn't think of that sooner."

The idea last year, by British businessman James King, was to put out an English-language edition of Pravda. And although King maintained he had no connection to the Soviets, some citizens may have found that a little hard to believe—at least until recently.

Not a big hit at 25,000 to 30,000 copies, with translations of Pravda articles weeks or months late, King's paper went from weekly to monthly and then, earlier this year, stopped altogether.

However, when it was publishing, King had translated an article from the Soviets that accused Nicholas Daniloff of working for the CIA in his job as Moscow correspondent for U.S. News & World Report. One reader was Adam Roberts, a professor at Balliol College at Oxford, who is married to the sister of Daniloff's wife.

Roberts and the Daniloffs were incensed and filed suit, but by the time they came to an agreement to publish an apology, there was nothing to publish in it.

Now King has come out with a new, improved Pravda, which included in its first edition this month a reply from Daniloff that the earlier article "is replete with omissions, distortions and untruths. I reiterate: I have never been employed by the CIA or any other intelligence agency of the United States or any other country."

The article includes a notation that the publishers, printers and distributors "assert that there is no evidence whatsoever for the allegation and wish to apologize."

Does that mean that the big Pravda in Moscow is apologizing to Daniloff?

It will be a hot day in Siberia before that happens. Asked about it all, a spokesman for the Moscow Pravda simply said "there is no connection" to the British newspaper by the same name . . .